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NEW OBSERVATIONS

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CULTURES OF CYBERSPACE

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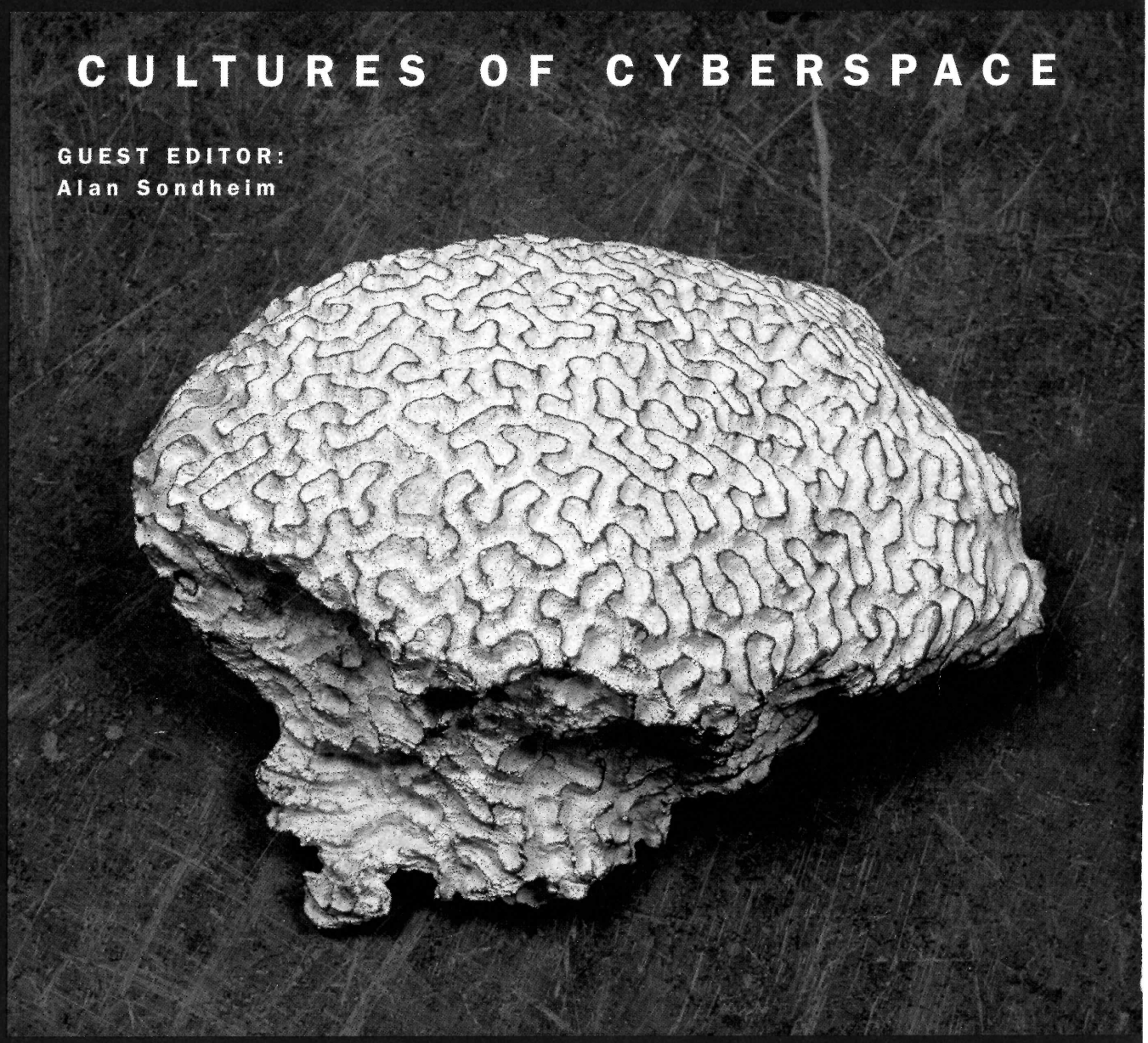

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John Suler

THE PALACE

You click "connect" and on your computer screen you see your avatar — a small picture of Bill Clinton — materialize into the scene of a plush hotel bar. Immediately you notice that several of your friends are already there. Their avatars — including Betty Boop, the Mona Lisa, and Leonardo DiCaprio — are sitting in the velvet chairs or hovering in midair. One joker in a Pegasus avatar is suspended upside down from the chandelier. A comic strip balloon pops out of Mona Lisa's head. "Glad to see you finally made it," it says inside the balloon. Applause pours out from your computer speaker. Leonardo played that sound file, so apparently he's glad to see you too. You type "Hi everyone!" hit return, and your greeting appears in the balloon extending from Bill Clinton's head. You click on the chair next to Mona and your Clinton avatar jumps into it. "We were just headed to the beach," Leonardo says. "Come on!" After your friends' avatars disappear through the mirror hanging on the wall, you click on the mirror and follow them. Suddenly, the scene on your computer screen changes. Now your avatar and those of your friends are on the coast of a surrealistic beach. In a silly adolescent attempt to outdo your friends who have changed into their Bay Watch avatars, you transform yourself into Arnold Schwartzenegger wearing a polka dot 1920s bathing suit. Glasses of wine appear next to everyone's avatar while Mona and Leonardo finish up a game of tic-tac-toe that they have painted into the sky. You switch to an avatar that looks like a solar eclipse and hang yourself on a cloud next to the tic-tac-toe game. "I just love playing with avatars," you say to Betty in a whisper balloon, so no one else can hear.

BARBARA SIMCOE *Crying Girl and Pleading Man*, 1994-95. Oil on linen, 39 x 33 inches

This could very well be a scene at any one of the hundreds of Palace sites across the internet. Created by Jim Bumgardner and TPI (The Palace Incorporated), Palace is a client/server program that creates a highly visual and auditory "chat" environment. Users may purchase the client, which enables them to connect to other Palace sites. Or they may purchase the server, which enables them to create their own site consisting of as many interlinked rooms as they like, with any background graphics they choose for those rooms. People communicate with each other through typed text that appears on the screen as balloons similar to comic strips, as well as with prerecorded sounds (.wav files). But most importantly, they communicate by the types of "avatars" they create to represent themselves and in how they move those avatars about the room. Any image can be used to create an avatar, and avatars can be changed at will.

Each Palace site is a unique community with its own graphical theme, topical interest, and culture. There are haunted houses, futuristic towns, bowling alleys, castles, Star Trek Enterprises, and Hawaiian Stables. The oldest and one of the largest sites (with as many as 300 people connected at the same time) is the "Main Mansion," which is run by TPI and supervised by "wizards" who host newcomers and possess the power to pin, silence, and kill (disconnect) misbehaving users. At such large Palace sites, the population evolves into a complex community of cliques, classes, and even hostile gangs. Other sites are much smaller, consisting of just a handful of friends. In a kind of cybermarriage, some people use the Palace program to "set up house." Some sites are works of art — a kind of gallery where a person displays his or her creations.

But all Palatians have one thing in common — a love of graphics and the ability to experiment with their identity through the avatars they wear. For a detailed description of PalaceSpace, visit cyberpsychologist John Suler's web site "Life at the Palace"

http://www1.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/palstudy.html